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ABSTRACT

Decreased resources, increased accountability demands, and the need for economic survival have made the evaluation of the outcomes of continuing education efforts in nursing a salient need. Economic survival, in particular, is largely dependent upon the skill of the continuing educator in achieving the desirable balance between organizational and market needs. Marketing is a valuable tool for enhancing the utility of the decisions resulting from outcome evaluation in continuing education. It is, however, a tool that is usually not part of the repertoire of most evaluators of continuing education programs in nursing. This paper explores the value of applying the marketing concept to maximize the utilization of findings from outcome evaluation in the administration and development of continuing education programs in nursing. More specifically, a marketing management viewpoint is elaborated and the specific steps to be undertaken in applying the strategic marketing process to continuing education programs in nursing are detailed. A marketing plan for continuing education in nursing developed for employment in a continuing education nursing program in a large complex health care center is presented as a prototype for how the desired relationship between marketing and continuing education outcome evaluation can be achieved. (PN)

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MARKETING AS A TOOL FOR MAXIMIZING THE UTILIZATION OF FINDINGS FROM OUTCOME EVALUATION

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Marketing As A Tool For Maximizing The Utilization Of Findings From Outcome Evaluation

The 1980's have magnified the need for efficiency and economies of scale in the delivery of continuing education for nurses. Today the administrator of continuing education in nursing contends with decreased resources, increased accountability demands, a more consumer-conscious nurse and competition from other continuing education providers and corporations. The need for economic survival has made the evaluation of the outcomes of continuing education efforts in nursing a salient need. In addition, survival is contingent upon the ability of the continuing education administrator in nursing to achieve a desirable balance between organizational and market needs. Marketing is a strategy which provides this link and is a valuable tool in maximizing the utility of outcome evaluation in the administration and development of continuing education programs in nursing.

While in the literature, there exists a concensus on the definition of continuing education in nursing, the definition of marketing in the context of continuing education in nursing is not as identifiable. For example, in some instances marketing is defined as "a business strategy designed to provide information to consumers of a given service or product in order to entice the potential consumer to that given service or product." This definition, like that advanced by many nonmarketing oriented individuals, inaccurately defines "marketing" as synonymous with "selling." Marketing is accurately defined as a business strategy which identifies consumers' needs and wants and seeks to satisfy or fulfill those needs and wants with the appropriate product or service and exchange processes.

The marketing process does not begin after the product or service is developed but rather it begins with the inception of needs and wants on the part of the consumer and leads to the development of a product or service. Marketing

in the context of continuing education in nursing is an ongoing, comprehensive process which involves analyzing the nursing consumers' needs and wants, the organization's goals, objectives and resources, and in turn, developing, planning and monitoring offerings which satisfy both the consumer and the organization.

Outcome evaluation is a procedure for obtaining information in order to make decisions on outcomes of the continuing education effort. The emphasis is on answering the question: Did the offering have an effect or impact?

Marketing can serve as a tool in the design, implementation and communication of results in outcome evaluation. The design of outcome evaluation should be in accordance with both the market's expectations and needs and the organization's expectations and needs. Marketing's goal is to deliver a service or product in such a way that the market and organization's expectations and needs are in unison. The design of the outcome evaluation should seek to measure the degree of marketing success. The design should also seek to identify new needs and wants.

The implementation of the outcome evaluation can be enhanced when the organization interacts effectively with it's environment and a marketing system can augment this relationship. Within a successful marketing system, networks are established with the organization's environment. For instance, in order to establish the needs of nurses in planning continuing education offerings an important resource is the nursing administrator. A marketing system should provide for interaction with the administrator in developing offerings. This type of interaction will most likely lead to increased cooperation when administering the outcome evaluation. Marketing techniques can also be utilized when seeking respondents for outcome evaluation. For instance, a promise for a summary of results will entice respondents to participate.

And finally, marketing is powerful in communcating outcome evaluation and in utilizing outcome evaluation as a marketing tool as well as a decision-making tool. The results of favorable outcome evaluations should be utilized when the corresponding program is offered again. This communication is proof of the success of the program and can be included in brochures, advertisements or letters.

The outcome evaluation should also be analyzed for ways to enhance the current marketing effort and can also be analyzed to provide for new directions in future marketing endeavors.

In order to comprehend the marketing concept and its value in outcome evaluation it is necessary to examine the application of the strategic marketing process to continuing education in nursing. Philip Kotler presents the strategic marketing process as a series of 6 steps: Market Opportunity Analysis, Target Market Selection, Competitive Positioning Strategy, Marketing Systems Development, Marketing Plan Development and finally Plan Implementation and Control. Each step has an implication for continuing education in nursing.

1) <u>Market Opportunity Analysis</u> involves answering questions such as: Who comprises the total market for nursing continuing education? What are their needs? Where are the various markets located? Which of the markets are feasible for the institution? and What are the future market opportunities for the institution? It is important that the organization understand the current and potential markets as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the service it provides. A market opportunity only exists if the institution is capable of fulfilling the need.

Tools and sources for analyzing market opportunities include outcome evaluation, the needs assessment survey, nursing literature, advisory boards, the continuing education provider and the hospital administrator.

Outcome evaluation can be useful in identifying market opportunities in that findings can indicate the weaknesses and strengths of the organization's offerings. The outcome evaluations may also indicate what the respondents are seeking for in future continuing education offerings.

When generating marketing opportunities it is critical to remember to utilize multiple indicators rather than relying on one marketing research activity. For example, relying solely on outcome evaluation for opportunities would in most cases exclude the hospital administrators input. If the opportunity is not a need of the hospital and they subsequently refuse payment, the program would fail.

The second step of the strategic marketing process is <u>target market selection</u>. Continuing education is unique from other forms of education, primarily due to its diversity. Learners vary in their interests, educational background and in their types and number of years of experience. Content or style of an offering can vary from the very broad to the very specific. For this reason there is a need for market segmentation and the selection of a target market for individual continuing education offerings in nursing. However, too often administrators take the strategy of impressing that the content of the workshop is of importance to all nurses. Yet when the participant experiences the inappropriate workshop and it does not satisfy their needs, outcome evaluations will indicate this and the nurse is unlikely to participate again.

In order to select a target market it is useful to try to quantify the size, locality and demographics of the market. Those segments that have the most promising demand and in which the institution is capable of delivering a quality offering should be selected as target markets. For instance, if a large demand exists for an offering on how to use minicomputers in the hospital setting, and the institution is equipped with computer facilities this would be a strong target market segment; however, if the institution does not have access to minicomputers the target market segment would not be feasible.

After identification of the most attractive target segments for the institution, it is then imperative to design the content, physical environment and marketing approaches for that segment.

The third step of the strategic marketing process is the competitive positioning strategy. In continuing education in nursing competitive positioning strategy requires development of a general idea of what kind of offer to make to the target market in relation to other offers of continuing educators. This requires an information gathering process to answer the questions: What are other nursing schools, hospitals and associations offering? What characteristics such as content, timing, social environment, price, location, and expertise do these continuing education offerings possess? Can your institution provide the same offering in a more attractive, stimulating or unique approach? What markets has the competition overlooked and why? Can your institution effectively reach this market?

An important consideration in defining the positioning strategy is to consider the continuing education program's purpose, goals, and strengths in the educational environment. The implication is not to initiate cut throat competition in continuing education in nursing but to position the program so that the strengths of the institution over competitors are fully capitalized upon. If the institution has effectively positioned it's programs it is likely that outcome evaluations will substantiate it.

The fourth step of the strategic marketing process is marketing systems development. The establishment of the marketing system is imperative to ensure the strategic marketing process functions efficiently. An administrator of continuing education in nursing who views marketing as an important strategy one year and then fails to build networks for the marketing implementations in the future will forfeit any benefits gained.

Outcome evaluations are one such network that when repeated yearly serve as a data base for developing marketing plans. Other system components include delegation of responsibility, development of information systems, planning systems for goals, strategies and tactics, a control system for monitoring success and failures of offerings, and a communication system for interaction with the external environment such as agencies, government, media and the public.

In continuing education in nursing communication with the external environment becomes important to success since the institution's image relies on a positive relationship with the environment. An agency must be fully involved and committed to the benefits of education for maximum results to occur. An information system along with an incentive system developed in agencies could ensure greater distribution of information about educational opportunities. An information system consists of established channels for communicating. With agencies this could take the form of a bulletin board for offerings, brochures, letters or questionnaires. An incentive system consists of inducements to motivate action. With agencies this could take the form of group rates, input into design of offerings, or time schedules for offerings tailored to the agency. Outcome evaluation findings are an important information source in communicating with agencies the value of the continuing education offerings. As previously mentioned, a good relationship with agencies is additionally important in order to conduct outcome evaluations in a desirable atmosphere.

The fifth step of the strategic marketing process is the marketing plan development. Philip Kotler defines the marketing plan as a written document that elaborates the goals, strategies and tactics that will be used to gain and maintain the competitive position and results that the institution is seeking. While many authors on marketing in continuing education in nursing offer worthwhile tactics and strategies there has been little concern for formalizing these into a comprehensive, documented marketing plan.

The contents of a marketing plan include: a statement of current market position, problems and opportunities of the nursing continuing education program, objectives and goals for the marketing endeavor, criteria for measurement of goal achievement, a statement of strategy for the program as a whole as well as for individual offerings, an action plan designed to achieve the strategies and a budget for the marketing endeavor.

One of the most critical ingredients of the action plan is the determination of how the market will be reached. Many continuing nursing educators have found that getting the information to the nurse about the coming educational events is more important in maximizing the number of participants than an expensive brochure. Utilizing marketing as an ongoing process should alleviate some of this difficulty. In constructing the action plan it is paramount to keep the target market and marketing strategy in perspective in all aspects of the plan. In establishing the marketing plan it is inappropriate to establish one course of action for all offerings, again the emphasis needs to be on who the target market is and how the specific offering can best be designed to penetrate this market.

The final step of the strategic marketing process is <u>plan implementation and control</u>. Plan implementation involves the assignment of duties in order to carry out the marketing plan. The highly labor intensive nature of the administration of continuing education programs is not fully comprehended by non-continuing education academics. This is compounded by the fact that employees at a school often possess an orientation to time that everything can be done tomorrow. This potential for sabatoging can be combated with detailed procedures and responsibility flows for implementation of each element of the plan.

Outcome evaluations is a major source of control of the marketing process. The findings of the evaluation must flow in the form of feedback for modifications of the marketing plan to be implemented appropriately. Utilizing a cost-benefit analysis is another source of control for both the outcome evaluation

and the strategic marketing process to ensure that the expected results are being achieved in a cost efficient manner.

Other methods of control include coding of mailing lists to determine which lists respond best and why, monitoring of zipcodes to determine where to mail and hold programs the next time around, surveying of attendees and non-attendees to help better focus the program and coding and record keeping of marketing media activities to determine the most cost effective.

In summary, at present marketing as a comprehensive strategy has not reached its potential in continuing education in nursing. There persists the false premise that marketing is solely composed of occassional attempts at identifying needs and advertising techniques. While these are elements of marketing, of more importance is development of an operative strategic marketing process that is capable of managing the marketing function within the institution. Too often "unique, creative" advertising activities are the focus of the administrator of continuing education in nursing. These tactics are superficial if the institution has not developed its marketing opportunities, knows who the target markets are, the competitive position, marketing plan, marketing system and planning and control system.

Outcome evaluation coupled with the marketing process provides the administrator of continuing education in nursing direction for the program. Outcome evaluation is versatile in that it provides information during various steps of the strategic marketing process. The findings of outcome evaluation can generate marketing opportunities, guide target market selection and competitive positioning, provide for marketing systems development, plan control and can also be utilized as a promotional source for the marketing plan.

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The Strategic Marketing Process

Step 1 Market Opportunity Analysis

- *Who comprises the total market for nursing continuing education?*
- *What are their needs?*
- *Where are the various markets located?*
- *What are the strengths and weaknesses of the institution?*
- *Which of the markets are feasible and obtainable by the institution?*
- *What are the future market opportunities for the institution?*

Step 2 Target Market Selection

- *Segment the markets by offering*
- *Quantify the markets*
- *Match the organization resources to the most attractive target market*

Step 3 Competitive Positioning Strategy

- *What are other institutions (nursing schools, hospitals, associations) offering?*
- *What characteristics (content, timing, social environment, price, location, expertise) do these continuing education offerings possess?*
- *Can your institution provide the same offering in a more attractive, stimulating or unique approach?*
- *What markets have the competition overlooked? Why?*
- *Can your institution effectively reach this market?*

Step 4 Marketing Systems Development

- *Delegation of responsibility*
- *Information systems*
- *Planning systems*
- *Control systems: outcome evaluations*
- *Communication system with external environment*

Step 5 Marketing Plan Development

- *Statement of current market position*
- *Problems and opportunities*
- *Objectives and goals of the marketing endeavor*
- *Criteria for measurement of goal achievement*
- *Statement of strategies: program, individual offerings*
- *Action plan*
- *Budget*

Step 6 Plan Implementation and Control

- *Detailed procedures, responsibility flows*
- *Outcome evaluation*
- *Coding mailings*
- *Coding and record keeping of marketing media activities*
- *Cost-benefit analysis*

SAMPLE (ABBREVIATED) MARKETING PLAN FOR XYZ CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAM IN NURSING

I. Situation Analysis

A. Statement of Current Market Position

The XYZ Continuing Education Program in nursing is currently the only program in this state that focuses on the middle management nurse who holds a BSN or higher degree.

B. Major Problems and Opportunities

The major problems of the program include the lack of scheduling flexibility of the target markets, the availability of facilities within which to hold the programs and the threat of losing federal funds for the program.

II. Marketing Objectives And Goals

A. Objectives

1. To expand the program to reach and entice national markets for post masters and doctoral nursing offerings.

B. Goals

1. To obtain a 50% attendance for post master and doctoral offerings from attendees who are located outside of the state area.

III. Marketing Strategies

A. Program

1. To focus on providing offerings which focus on the identified need for management in nursing, evaluation and research and which capitalize on the resources and expertise of the institution in these areas.

B. Offering -"Management Techniques for the Administrator"

1. To concentrate on the need identified for practical management techniques that the administrators can utilize in their setting.

IV. Action Plan

A. Offering - "Management Techniques for the Administrator"

1. Utilize the favorable outcome evaluation results from Spring 1980 in promoting the program.

V. Budget